

One Step Closer to Achieving Gender Equality in Lesotho

Five years ago, Marethabile Sechibe was working on her dream of opening a guest house. Because women in Lesotho then held the legal status of children, her husband needed to sign all the paperwork. Marethabile also needed his permission to run the business.

The process became tedious; she often had to run home to get her husband's signature or schedule a time that was convenient for both of them to fill out paperwork at government offices.

Despite these hurdles, Marethabile realized her dream and opened the Scenery Guest House.



Marethabile Sechibe stands in front of her guest house.

Last year, she learned through flyers and on the radio about the Legal Capacity of Married Person's Act of 2006, landmark legislation that the Millennium Challenge Corporation helped pass. She didn't realize that having joint ownership of her business and being able to take care of the paperwork herself was an option.

She can now sign her name in business documents and legally owns the business with her husband. Since then, she got a loan from a bank and is expanding the guest house to include a conference center.

"I am excited to have legal ownership and the legal support to grow my business without my husband's consent," she said. "I am also lucky to have a supportive husband who is OK with these changes."

Like Marethabile, men and women throughout Lesotho are learning about the Legal Capacity of Married Person's Act and how it can help them become more active participants in the economy. The Gender Equality Activity team at Millennium Challenge Account-Lesotho (MCA-Lesotho), the local entity managing the implementation of Lesotho's MCC compact, is building awareness, knowledge and acceptance of gender equality in the economic rights of both men and women.

The team is conducting training and has a country-wide outreach program to reach into rural society and institutions to advocate and teach the benefits of gender equality for the development of the Basotho people.

Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs

As part of the advocacy efforts, MCA-Lesotho established the Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs earlier this year to bring women entrepreneurs together to share experiences, best practices, information, and networking in order to address challenges in business and the economy. The federation aims to bring gender aspects of the economy to the attention of policy makers, especially the issues of women's participation in economic planning and sustainable development.

Marethabilie is a member of the federation, which is made up of women entrepreneurs who own small, medium and large businesses, along with aspiring women entrepreneurs. There are 6,550 members with chapters located in all the districts of Lesotho. This includes women living with HIV and AIDS and women living with disabilities.

The activities of the federation include capacity building, resource mobilization and establishing business networks.

Contributing to gender equality

The Lesotho Compact's Gender Equality Activity is building understanding and support for changes resulting from the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act. Over 100 compact-funded outreach activities have been held to-date. MCC supported the Government of Lesotho in this area of legal reform, which repealed women's status as second-class citizens. Prior to 2006, married women needed their husbands or other male relatives' permission to access loans, own property and even have medical surgery.

Change takes time, but it is happening. More Basotho women are taking leadership roles, have joint ownership of property and are becoming key movers and equal participants in economic development.